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THE USE OF MYTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. I.

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It has been one of my duties for the past few years to introduce classes of Japanese students to the mythological tales and personages of Greece and Rome as preparatory to the study and appreciation of English literature. In the course of this instruction I have had occasion to call attention to parallel stories in the Bible in which similar truths or great facts of human nature and experience are taught or illustrated. As a result my attention and thought have been directed anew to the question of the existence and use of mythic elements in the Old Testament.

Perhaps the main reason why most Christians shrink from the idea of there being myths in the Bible is the loose conception, often taken, of a myth as a euphemism for falsehood or lie; and, as the great aim of the Bible seems to be the declaring of truth, the possibility of its containing lies is very disturbing. We need therefore to define our term. For our present purpose we may summarize the scientific definitions found in such standard works as Murray's *Manual of Mythology*, Keightley's *Classical Mythology*, and *The Century Dictionary*, as follows:

A myth is a more or less fictitious or imaginary story or narrative respecting, *First*, deities or objects of worship; *Second*, prehistoric events connected with the life of a nation or of the human race; *Third*, prehistoric heroes, real or imaginary; *Fourth*, the phenomena of nature.

I am well aware that some mythologists would reduce all myths to the fourth class, and seek to explain the origin of every myth as an attempt of man in his poetical and philosophical moods to account for, or, rather, to clothe in language and thus make understandable to his imagination and fancy, some ongoing of the world outside of man. But we need not stop to discuss

this classification, for the fourfold division given answers to the general conception; and that is the conception we need in considering the subject before us.

In regard to myths of the first class—stories of deities or objects of worship—we can say at once that, though the Jewish people sprang from a race worshipping various deities, and though they came in contact with the systems of mythology of Egypt, Phœnicia, Babylon, Chaldæa and other ancient peoples, including Greece and Rome; and while they at times believed in and worshiped the various gods of some of these nations, yet we have in the Old Testament no stories about any of them.

Again, whatever theory may be true as to the different names of deity in the Old Testament, the complete absence of stories about their origin or the relations between the Being intended by them and the gods of the surrounding peoples reduces the mythic elements to the minimum of possibilities. About the only chance for a reference to a myth would be in regard to God's relations to beings other than human and less than divine. It is precisely in this connection that we find what may be such a reference in the allusions to a conflict between God and some proud, arrogant giant being or beings, which are found in the following passages :

- ¹ God will not withdraw his anger ;
The helpers of Rahab (the Proud One) do stoop under him.
- ² He maketh peace in his high places ;
Is there any number of his armies?
- ³ He stilleth the sea with his power,
And by his understanding he smiteth through Rahab.
- ⁴ Canst thou bind the chain of the Pleiades,
Or loose the bands of Orion (the foolhardy Giant)?
- ⁵ O arm of the Lord ! art thou not it
That cut Rahab to pieces, and pierced the Dragon?

It should be said, however, that A. B. Davidson and others interpret this "Rahab" as referring to the sea, ultimately, and so make it a nature myth of another kind while agreeing that in

¹ Job 9 : 13. ² *Ibid.* 25 : 2-3. ³ *Ibid.* 26 : 12. ⁴ *Ibid.* 38 : 31. ⁵ Isa. 51 : 9.

Bildad's speech (Job 25 : 2-3), the reference is to a war, similar to the Titanic war of Greek mythology, where Jehovah overcame with the help of his heavenly armies. It has been suggested also that the Nephilim, mentioned in Gen. 6 : 4, refer to this same race of Titans who made war upon God. Aside from this reference we are not likely to find any use of a myth of the first class in the Old Testament.

Another class of myths found among all nations—if we except the Jews—is about prehistoric events connected with the origin and early life either of the human race or of individual nations.

In Genesis, up to the tenth verse of the eleventh chapter, we find what purports to be accounts of creation, including that of the first man and woman; how evil came into the world; the first murder and the building of the first city; the destruction of the habitable world by a flood, and the subsequent re peopling it; the origin of different languages and the consequent dispersion of the races.

I suppose that few, if any, doubt that tradition had *some* share in preparing these accounts for the use of the first writers; and that in most of these narratives, if not in all, there is *some* play of the human imagination manifested in certain pictorial efforts to make these scenes and truths appreciable and vivid. If this be so, then, even under divine inspiration and divine guidance, the natural processes of thought, including the imagination, of the writers would make use of at least non-historical elements. One illustration of this, which would be admitted by every thoughtful person, is the declaration: "And the Lord *came down to see* the city and the tower which the children of men builded."

It would be too long a task to go into the details of each of these narratives; nor, if we did, could we determine just where fact and fiction begins, supposing the latter to exist. In point of fact no two minds, certainly no two classes of mind, would draw the lines precisely alike. So far as I can see, we must take the stories as they stand, and with all the light we can obtain from every source—including the parallel accounts of the same, or similar events found among other peoples—determine each one for himself the general impression left on his mind. For

my part, the impression has been, from my earliest recollection, that of a *story*, setting forth great facts, but still a story, the details of which are clearly imaginary. The talking of a serpent to a woman, the conception that knowledge of good and evil could be obtained by eating a certain kind of fruit, or life be gained from another tree, and the like, seem purely and evidently fictitious forms, sort of interesting, even necessary garments,—garments of flesh, if you will,—clothing truths that otherwise would fail to be recognized. Some, I know, think the account of the fall is an allegory; but it does not seem to have the self-conscious marks of that class of writings. To me Lenormant's¹ admission seems more in harmony with the probabilities; namely, "that the inspired compiler of Genesis used, in relating the fall of the first human pair, a narrative which had assumed an entirely mythical character among the surrounding peoples, and that the form of the serpent attributed to the tempter may, in its origin, have been an essentially naturalistic symbol."

With regard to myths of the third class, those about heroes, real or imaginary, one hesitates to say much; for here it is possible—as the facts in the case abundantly show—to take the widest divergency of view, and, therefore, here is the greatest liability of mistake. I suppose Samson occurs to nearly everyone as the character in the Old Testament most likely to have mythic elements attached to him. The story of Jonah is so commonly thought of as a "Parable setting forth the love of God to the Gentiles" that we can leave it out of the account. We are all familiar with the theory that Samson, like Hercules, is a *sun myth*. Possibly, but if so, he has been so thoroughly metamorphosed into a man that he has lost all trace of his origin except his name, which means *sun-like*; and how dangerously foolish it is to build or reconstruct a myth out of a name may be seen from that ingenious attempt, made a few years ago, to show that Gladstone was a sun myth (*glad-stone*, *e. e.*, bright, light-giving-stone). The writer might also have gone on to show that Disraeli was Gladstone's father, instead of the black storm dragon that on occasion swallows up the sun, for was not the

¹ *Beginnings of History*, p. 115.

former afterward called *beacon's-field*, and Lord beacon's-field at that?

That nearly every nation of antiquity had its hero of strength is true, I suppose, and that there gather about these heroes more or less of marvelous and fictitious accounts is not only probable but inevitable. I see no insuperable objections to supposing that some such accounts adhere to the Jewish hero Samson, but beyond this there seems no good reason for going. Certainly, if Samson be a *sun myth* then the writer of his life is proved to be a most wonderful, creative literary genius; for, long before there had been gradually developed the faculty for writing fiction, in the modern sense, this writer had this faculty so fully in possession that he gave to literature a character thoroughly human from top to toe, "every inch a man," such as not even Homer could give or Shakespeare surpass.

In myths of the fourth class, myths of fabulous birds or creatures originally setting forth well-known phenomena of the physical world, we find the most unmistakable references and allusions in the Old Testament, particularly in the poetical portions, precisely where we should expect to find them supposing them to exist.

Take the reference in Job, 29:18, to that fabled bird, the Phœnix: Then I said: I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the Phœnix; or to the mythical night-hag or demon (Heb. *Lilith*.),—traditional first wife of Adam—mentioned in Isa. 34:14, who was to haunt Edom along with satyrs and wild beasts of the desert.

It would be interesting to examine other examples, especially those bird-like, or beast-bird-like creatures the cherubim and seraphim which, according to Dr. Friederich Delitzsch, were mythic in origin. "The cherubim," he says, "were originally personifications of the clouds and the seraphim of the serpent-like flashes of lightning."¹ I shall confine myself to one more example, one which appears under a variety of names.

¹ *Wo lag das Paradies* (1881), p. 155, quoted by Cheyne in *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, Vol. II. pp. 297, 298.

Job (3:8) as he curses the day when he was born, says:

“Let them curse it that curse the day,

Who are skillful to rouse up Leviathan” (*or the Dragon*).

If we compare this with Job’s saying (26:13):

“By his spirit the heavens are made bright,

His hand hath pierced the swift serpent,”

we get a clear idea of the meaning of both passages. Workers of magic, or men currently believed to have the power, are implored to overcome or cover the day with darkness by their skill in waking up some huge creature, serpent-like monster, called leviathan. On the other hand, the Lord, by his having pierced the serpent, clears, makes bright the heavens. Thus we have both sides of this ancient and world-wide mythic belief: first, that a monstrous winged serpent (the storm-dragon) had the power to darken the day by covering or swallowing the sun; second, that some divine being (in this case, the Lord) was quite able to slay this monster and, by so doing, restore the heavens to their accustomed brightness.

In Isaiah (27:1) we have another reference to this same mythical creature and the Lord’s power to slay it:

In that day the Lord
With his sore and great and strong sword,
Shall punish leviathan, the swift serpent,
And leviathan, the crooked serpent,
And he shall slay the dragon
That is in the sea.

If by “*the sea*” is meant “the waters that are above the heavens,” mentioned in the Psalms, the “upper ocean in its dark, cloudy reservoir,” then the reference is remarkably true to the character of several nature myths; for the dragon in the sea is then the same as the swift or gliding serpent, and that again is the same as the crooked or winding serpent. We thus have the dark storm-clouds personified under different aspects; swiftly, silently covering the sky; twisting themselves in out, over and around one another; and swimming in the sea overhead, and yet the three are one.